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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FRANKFURT 007903

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS RETAIN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN
SAARLAND ELECTIONS; FAR-RIGHT NPD MAKES SURPRISING GAINS

REF: A. BERLIN 2736

[1](#)B. 2003 FRANKFURT 3946
[1](#)C. 2003 FRANKFURT 5668
[1](#)D. 2003 FRANKFURT 9706
[1](#)E. FRANKFURT 4964
[1](#)F. FRANKFURT 5178
[1](#)G. FRANKFURT 5692
[1](#)H. FRANKFURT 5927
[1](#)I. FRANKFURT 7642
[1](#)J. BERLIN 3066

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Geeta Pasi, reasons 1.4(b) and
(d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) Led by popular Minister-President Peter Mueller, Saarland Christian Democrats (CDU) netted an impressive 47.5% of the vote in September 5 elections and defended their absolute majority in the state assembly. Damaged by public disenchantment with Hartz IV reforms (Ref A), Social Democrats (SPD) polled 30.8%, a 13.6% drop from 1999 and the party's second-worst result in the postwar era. Greens and Free Democrats (FDP) re-entered Parliament (with 5.6% and 5.2% respectively) after failing to cross the five-percent threshold in 1999. The far-right National Democrats (NPD) capitalized on anti-reform sentiment to capture 4% of the vote, a four-fold increase from 1999. Voter turnout was 55.5%, the lowest in any western German state since the end of World War II. END SUMMARY.

Victorious CDU Cites Botched National Reforms

[1](#)2. (C) The Saarland CDU coasted to victory on the coattails of popular Minister-President Peter Mueller, retaining its absolute majority in the state parliament with 47.5% of the vote (up 2%). Meanwhile, Saarland Social Democrats suffered losses across the board, winning in only three of the state's 52 districts. A lone bright spot for the SPD was the strong showing of Saarbruecken mayoral candidate Charlotte Britz, expected to beat Josef Heckmann (CDU) in the upcoming runoff. Voter turnout was 55.5%, the lowest in postwar German history. Sixty-thousand SPD voters from 1999 (out of 800,000 eligible voters) stayed home during this election while 30,000 cast votes for other parties. In a meeting with the Ambassador two days after his victory, Minister-President Mueller attributed the strong CDU showing to the SPD's failure to properly explain and implement Agenda 2010 reforms.

...While Social Democrats Finger Left-Wing Lafontaine

[1](#)3. (U) SPD leader Heiko Maas blamed the party's poor performance on former Minister-President and outspoken left-wing activist Oskar Lafontaine. Maas characterized Lafontaine as a divisive force whose high-profile campaign against Agenda 2010 had compromised the state party's campaign for moderate reform. National SPD chairman Franz Muntefering accused Lafontaine of scuttling the campaign. In an interview with the daily tabloid Bild Zeitung (which has the largest circulation in Germany), Lafontaine rejected the accusations and blamed the SPD loss on the failed Agenda 2010, saying that Social Democrats would continue to lose elections as long as Chancellor Schroeder maintains the present course of reform.

Far-Right National Democrats Make Disturbing Gains

[1](#)4. (SBU) The far-right and anti-immigrant National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) received 4% of the vote, a four-fold increase from 1999 and their best showing since [1](#)1962. Observers express particular concern that the party polled 11% among young voters (more than the mainstream FDP, for instance). Saarland NPD standard-bearer Peter Marx brandished the result as a sign that the NPD will "leave the SPD behind" in upcoming Saxony elections. Political observers attributed the far-right's surge to anti-reform

sentiment (many of the votes came from former SPD strongholds) and to a new level of cooperation among right-wing parties. Following the June 2004 agreement between the NPD and DVU (German People's Union) to coordinate election lists in Brandenburg and Saxony, the far-right Republicans (Republikaner, who polled 1.4% in 1999) agreed to withdraw from Saarland elections to clear the way for the NPD and avoid splitting the right-wing vote.

Mainstream Small Parties Also Make Big Moves

15. (SBU) Both the FDP and the Greens posted clear gains in the recent election. Green party officials hailed their 5.6% showing as a significant achievement given Saarland's largely rural and conservative electorate. Charismatic FDP standard-bearer Christoph Hartmann noted that the FDP is now on an equal footing with the Greens in Saarland and credited the public's desire for a "centrist opposition party" (according to polls, most voters believed the FDP would not end up in coalition with the CDU). The Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) polled a disappointing 2.3% despite months of intensive campaigning, underscoring that party's weakness outside its power base in eastern Germany.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Mueller's strong performance further cements his status as a rising star among conservatives and positions him as a potential player in any CDU national government following federal elections in 2006. The Saarland SPD stumbled in its campaign to mobilize its base through Lafontaine's high profile: left-wing voters dismissed Maas's moderate manifesto, while centrists bristled at Lafontaine's media crusade against Agenda 2010. Growing support for the NPD reform critique could be a harbinger of greater far-right gains in upcoming east German state elections.

BODDE